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File: Sturtz (Ohio file)

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NAVY DOCTOR LEAVES MILLION PATIENT PRACTICE

by Glenna Houston

Dr. Donald L. Sturtz, 57, retired from a million-patient practice March 1.

The Coshocton, Ohio, native, who retired as a Navy rear admiral, was fleet surgeon for the U.S. Atlantic Fleet, headquartered in Norfolk, Va. He was responsible for overseeing health care for more than 200,000 sailors and Marines and more than 800,000 armed services family members and retirees.

Among the people who benefitted from his care were the thousands of sailors manning the 67 Atlantic Fleet ships deployed to Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and the thousands of Fleet Marine Force Atlantic Marines in amphibious units afloat and ashore.

The surgeon, who graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, ensured the doctors, nurses and hospital corpsmen were ready to care for casualties in the Middle East.

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"One of my duties as fleet surgeon was to visit the hospitals, ships and units," Sturtz said shortly before his retirement. "I looked at their spaces, their logs and their documented training records. I personally knew dozens, and perhaps hundreds, of the doctors, nurses and corpsmen who were there. They were well trained; they were dedicated, and they were confident of their abilities to take care of casualties."

Sturtz supervised the transfer of about 1,500 medical department personnel from hospitals and clinics to units deploying to the Middle East -- most of them to staff the medical department of the hospital ship USNS Comfort and Fleet Hospital Five, a 500-bed field hospital set up in Saudi Arabia.

His guidance of the delivery of health care for the members of the Atlantic Fleet, their dependents and military retirees and his efforts in augmenting medical care for Desert Shield earned him the Legion of Merit medal at his retirement ceremony. The citation that accompanied his medal read in part, "Because of his compassionate approach, close coordination with line commanders and consummate communication skills, Rear Admiral Sturtz measurably improved the quality of life for all Atlantic Fleet service members and their families."

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The Legion of Merit, which was presented to Sturtz by Vice Adm. James A. Zimble, surgeon general of the Navy, is presented for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding service.

"You have the profound gratitude of your Navy Medical Department and of your Navy for the service you have given us," Zimble said at the retirement.

At the retirement ceremony, Sturtz received letters of recognition from Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Fleet; Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic and Commander in Chief, U.S. Atlantic Command; Chief of Naval Operations; Secretary of the Navy; and President George Bush.

Besides his responsibilities as Atlantic Fleet surgeon, Sturtz was also the command surgeon for the U.S. Atlantic Command and medical advisor for the Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic, the military headquarters for NATO, both based in Norfolk.

The Atlantic Command is a joint command that includes members of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard. Sturtz said his responsibility was coordinating care among the various service hospitals and medical planning for the Atlantic Command's units.

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As medical advisor for the NATO command, he was involved in interfacing with the medical and logistics personnel of the NATO nations and planning the evacuation and care for battle casualties.

"My job was to give the commanders in chief medical recommendations, counseling and advice, so they can better carry out their missions," Sturtz said.

Sturtz's 32 years of Navy experience uniquely prepared him for the challenges of his last assignment.

He began his Navy career in 1951 by attending the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. Soon after his graduation in 1955, he married the former Alice McGuire, also from Coshocton.

"When I was 14, my Mom and Dad gave me a book on the Naval Academy," Sturtz recalled. "It caught my imagination and gaining entrance there became a goal in my life."

The Ohioan served for five and one-half years -- first aboard the destroyer USS Radford. From there, he went to flight training and earned his wings as a Navy pilot. He flew the A-4D aircraft with attack squadrons in Jacksonville, Fla., and Virginia Beach, Va., and deployed aboard the aircraft carrier USS Forrestal.

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"I liked the people and liked what I was doing," the physician said. "But the call, the desire to go into medicine was so strong I did it."

He recalled with a laugh, "When I told my wife, who is a nurse, I wanted to leave the Navy to go to medical school, she said, 'I could have married a doctor six years ago.'

"She went to work as an O-R nurse, supported me and raised our children while I went to school."

Sturtz didn't get very far from the Navy. He had already re-joined it when he graduated from medical school in 1965. He completed his internship and residency in general surgery at Naval Hospital Philadelphia.

"My wife was happy with the decision to come back in the Navy," Sturtz said. "We felt very comfortable with the Navy family. We were very comfortable with the values and standards of the people we associated with. We liked the friendships and moving to new places."

His first job as a medical officer was aboard the aircraft carrier USS America.

"When I took care of patients, I knew what those people had to contend with," he said. "I knew the temperature extremes in the engine rooms, the cramped quarters and the noise level because I had worked in that environment. All that made me a more understanding and empathetic doctor."

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In 1971, Sturtz left USS America for an assignment as a staff surgeon at Naval Hospital, Bethesda, Md., where he served until 1980.

"As I look back on my time in the hospitals and clinics, on the wards and in the operating rooms, I remember patients," Sturtz said. "It is the people I met over the years -- and there were literally thousands. I remember patients by name and by illness and how they did. I remember their families. I remember people with courage and grace and dignity."

When he left Bethesda, Sturtz embarked on a part of his career that he is carrying over into retirement: teaching.

From 1980 until 1986, Sturtz served as a member of the Trauma Committee of the American College of Surgeons and as the chairman of the Navy Trauma Committee.

"During those years, I was involved in training trauma surgeons and participating in trauma education programs throughout the Navy," Sturtz said.

He has also served as the Navy Governor, American College of Surgeons and on the Graduate Medical Evaluation Committee, American College of Surgeons.

He was assigned to Naval Hospital San Diego as chairman of surgery and program director for residency training in general surgery in 1980.

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In 1984, he went to Naval Hospital, Oakland, Calif., as executive officer, second in command, and director of medical education. He reported to the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda as a professor of clinical surgery in late 1985.

"It is very rewarding to take a group of apprehensive students and see them develop into surgeons who can pass their boards and go on to operate independently," Sturtz said.

The surgeon will continue to see those rewards because he is returning to the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences as a professor of clinical surgery.

"I'll teach surgery to young medical students and physicians in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Public Health Service. I thrive on that and get great satisfaction from it," he said.

In late 1986, Sturtz's career took a new course. He became the first commanding officer of the Medical Treatment Facility aboard USNS Mercy, the first of a new class of hospital ships. Its maiden voyage was a four-month humanitarian mission to the Philippines and South Pacific.

"We demonstrated the competence of Navy medicine and the competence of our hospital ship," Zimble said. "He did a superb job as always, as expected."

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Sturtz was promoted to rear admiral in July 1987. In November of that year he took command of the Naval Medical Command, National Capital Region, based at Bethesda. He took over the job of fleet surgeon in January 1989.

On the day of his retirement Sturtz said, "For over 30 years the things I have seen and heard as a member of the United States Navy have shaped my life.

"There's a great reservoir of wisdom, experience and dedication to the highest moral standards and professionalism among the members of our organization."

He said countless individuals have influenced him and his wife and family in good ways.

"Throughout every paygrade, rank and station, we have learned from examples of honesty, integrity and loyalty that have made a lasting impact on our lives."

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